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Navy Ignored NSA Bid to Guard Pueblo

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The National Security Agency suggestion that the USS Pueblo be protected before she sailed for North Korea was rejected by Navy staffers in Honolulu without consultation with the top commander in the Pacific, according to testimony released yesterday.

The members of Joint Chiefs of Staff did not hear about the message until after the incident. Some subcommittee members decried this as a breakdown in command and control.

This disclosure is contained in the censored version of testimony taken in secret by a House Armed Services subcommittee this spring. The hearings also disclosed that:

- Adm. U. S. G. Sharpe, Commander-in-Chief of U.S. forces in the Pacific when the Pueblo was captured Jan. 23, 1968, said he was "lukewarm" to proposals to bomb North Korea in retaliation for the ship's capture. He said the U.S. did not have enough forces in the Pacific "to wage two wars at once."

While Sharpe said he could not remember recommending air strikes against North Korea, he asserted that he did want to station the destroyer Higbee off Wonsan, North Korea's main port.

His idea was to put the destroyer there in case it was needed to recover the Pueblo crew. Higher authorities vetoed sending a naval task force off Wonsan.

- The 303 Committee, a hush-hush civilian review panel which passes on intelligence missions, approved the Pueblo mission with no reservations. The cleared testimony deletes the committee's name but makes clear that this was the top review group involved.

The 303 Committee included such high-ranking civilians as the Deputy Secretary of Defense, Undersecretary of State, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency and the Presidential Assistant for National Security Affairs at the White House. Its function is one of the things being reviewed in light of the Pueblo disaster.

• The Status of Forces Treaty played no part in the failure to send American planes from Japan to aid the Pueblo, according to Sharpe. Adm. Frank L. Johnson, Commander of Navy forces in Japan when the Pueblo sailed, cited the treaty as a factor when asked about rescue efforts by the Naval Court of Inquiry.

American planes in Osan, South Korea, could have reached the Pueblo within 28 minutes, but the bomb racks they needed for the rescue role were stored in Japan.

Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, cited the racks as a factor in explaining to the subcommittee why it would have taken about three and a half hours for the planes to reach the Pueblo.

Another reason was that the few U. S. planes which were in South Korea at the time and suitable for a rescue attempt were armed with nuclear weapons rather than conventional ones.

Before publication of the Pueblo hearings, subcommittee Chairman Otis G. Pike, (D-N.Y.) revealed that the National Security Agency's message warning against sending the Pueblo out alone had gone astray. But just what happened to the message was not clear.

The closed-door testimony traces the NSA message to Sharpe's staff in Honolulu. The staffers there, according to the testimony, rejected the NSA suggestion.

Sharpe himself said the NSA message which went out Dec. 29, before the Pueblo sailed, was for his information, not for any specific action. The latter category, he said, would have received higher-level attention. He said the message was not brought to his attention at the time it was received by his staff.

The message most likely went to the Naval Intelligence Staff in Honolulu. This group was rife with dissension before the Pueblo sailed—a situation which surfaced only briefly during the Naval Court of Inquiry on the Pueblo this winter. Some Navy intelligence leaders fear that public discussion of problems within the Naval security groups will bring a new inquiry and thus are trying to keep the lid on.

The House Armed Services subcommittee is planning to release its report on the Pueblo inquiry within the next few days. A focus will be on the command and control problems revealed by the capture of the Pueblo and the shooting down of an EC-121 reconnaissance plane. The NSA message was discussed by the subcommittee in this context.

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